

Motion

Safeguarding Marine Ecosystems in Europe and Beyond

Signed by: Forum des Jeunes (FJ)

Co-signed by: Council of the German-speaking Youth of Belgium (RdJ), Flemish Youth Council (VJR), International Young Naturefriends (IYNF), Youth and Environment Europe (YEE)

1. Background and Context

The global ocean covers **71% of the Earth's surface**, contains **97% of the planet's water**, provides **99% of Earth's biologically habitable space**, and generates roughly **50% of global primary production** (IPCC, 2022). However, marine ecosystems are increasingly threatened by human activity. Overfishing, destructive fishing practices such as bottom trawling, plastic pollution, climate change and emerging industries such as deep-sea mining are causing severe damage to ocean ecosystems. These pressures risk pushing marine systems toward **irreversible tipping points** (World Economic Forum, 2017), with profound consequences for biodiversity, food systems, and global climate regulation.

In just **50 years** (1970-2020), the average size of monitored wildlife populations has collapsed by 73%, according to the Living Planet Index (WWF, 2024). **Industrial fishing** has been a major driver of this marine ecosystem degradation, accounting for around **80% of global fish catches** while often receiving disproportionate public subsidies compared to small-scale fishers. At the same time, **plastic pollution** has become a major threat to aquatic ecosystems. Each year, an estimated 19-23 million tonnes of plastic waste leak into rivers, lakes, and oceans, contributing to an estimated 75-199 million tonnes already present in marine environments (UNEP, 2021). Since 1950, around 7,000 of the 9,200 million tonnes of plastic ever produced have become waste, and without significant action, **plastic emissions into aquatic ecosystems are projected to nearly triple by 2040** (UNEP, 2021). Furthermore, the seafloor is not only exploited for fishing, but also for resource extraction. **Deep-sea mining** refers to the extraction of mineral resources from the ocean floor. However, scientific knowledge of deep sea ecosystems remains limited, with around **90% of species in potential mining areas still unknown** (Natural History Museum, 2023). As a result, the response of these ecosystems to large-scale mining is highly uncertain and could lead to species extinction or irreversible environmental changes.

In response to these environmental concerns, **younger generations are increasingly changing their behaviour. People aged 18-34** are the most

likely to reduce or stop eating seafood to help protect the ocean, with up to 27% cutting consumption and a smaller share eliminating it entirely (Marine Stewardship Council, 2025). Among young people, around **75% are concerned about the ocean's condition**, but there is a significant knowledge gap. About half rely on media (i.e. social media, films, print) for information, while only a minority learn through formal education, suggesting that marine topics are underrepresented in school curricula (Back To Blue, 2025). The Back To Blue survey also finds that despite high levels of concern, the level of understanding remains limited: **around 50% of young people do not fully grasp how the ocean affects their lives or how their actions impact it**, highlighting a disconnect between awareness and deeper knowledge.

Taken together, these trends highlight a growing tension between escalating environmental pressures on the ocean and shifting societal responses, particularly among younger generations, underscoring the **need for both systemic change and improved public understanding**.

2. Policy and Political Context

Several international and European initiatives aim to combat the degradation of marine ecosystems. The **United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 14, titled “Life Below Water,”** aims to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources. Furthermore, the **Agreement on Marine Biodiversity in Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ)**, adopted in 2023, represents a major international step toward regulating activities in areas beyond national jurisdiction, encompassing both the high seas and the deep seabed, and enabling the creation of marine protected areas in these regions (European Commission, 2026). The Agreement entered into force on 17 January 2026, and now has 88 State Parties.

At the European level, the **EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030** aims to protect **30% of marine and terrestrial areas**, including at least one-third that is under strict protection. Despite these commitments, many marine protected areas still allow harmful industrial activities such as bottom trawling or resource extraction, undermining their effectiveness. Furthermore, public subsidies continue to support environmentally harmful practices, including large-scale industrial fishing, while emerging threats such as **deep-sea mining** pose new risks to poorly understood marine ecosystems.

3. Strategic Alignment

This motion supports the European Youth Forum's priorities on climate action, biodiversity protection, and intergenerational justice.

By addressing the degradation of marine ecosystems, the European Youth Forum contributes to global efforts to:

- Protect biodiversity and restore ecosystems
- Mitigate and adapt to climate change
- Ensure sustainable food systems
- Promote fair and sustainable economic practices

Protecting marine ecosystems is also crucial for safeguarding the future of young people and ensuring the long term sustainability of the planet.

4. Recommendations

The European Youth Forum calls on:

1. EU institutions to:

- Invest in ocean literacy programmes within formal education systems, ensuring marine issues are integrated into school curricula across Member States.
- Ensure structured youth participation in EU ocean governance, including advisory bodies, consultation processes, and funded youth-led initiatives in marine conservation.
- Support transparent communication campaigns on sustainable seafood that are accessible, affordable, and relevant to young consumers.
- Eliminate subsidies that support industrial fishing practices harmful to marine ecosystems, particularly destructive techniques such as bottom trawling.
- Support and incentivise low-impact and small-scale fishing practices.
- Strengthen the regulation of sustainability labels and certification schemes to ensure transparency and credibility.
- Accelerate action to reduce plastic pollution, including restrictions on single-use plastics and improved waste management systems.
- Promote the creation and strict protection of marine protected areas across European waters.
- Adopt stronger monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to combat overfishing and illegal fishing practices.

2. National governments to:

- Integrate marine science and ocean sustainability into national education curricula at primary and secondary levels.

- Support youth-led local initiatives in coastal protection, marine monitoring, and waste reduction through funding, training, and institutional partnerships.
- Improve access to affordable sustainable food options, including seafood and plant-based alternatives, to address cost barriers influencing youth choices.
- Extend and effectively enforce marine protected areas, ensuring that industrial extractive activities are restricted in these zones.
- Take action to ensure that urban waste does not end up in the ocean, and instead, reduce waste, sort it, encourage composting, and combat illegal dumping.
- Prevent ocean pollution from wastewater by providing grants to cities so they can invest in water treatment infrastructure.
- Implement measures to protect the coastline and prevent the destruction of coastal habitats due to urbanisation.

3. Youth organisations and mobility programmes to:

- Actively promote ocean literacy and environmental awareness among young people.
- Partner with content creators, educators, and scientists to translate complex marine issues into accessible and engaging formats.
- Support youth engagement in marine conservation, policy advocacy, and scientific initiatives.
- Encourage youth participation in international environmental processes such as UN ocean conferences and biodiversity negotiations.

4. The Council of Europe and the United Nations to:

- Recognise the urgent need to protect marine ecosystems as a global public good.

- Strengthen international cooperation to address overfishing, pollution, and emerging threats such as deep-sea mining.
- Ensure meaningful youth participation in international ocean governance processes, including formal representation in UN negotiations and support for global youth engagement platforms.

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